Detail of *Four Panels from Untitled 1972*, 1975, lithograph, Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles. Photo by Geoffrey Clements

JASPER JOHNS PRINTS: THREE THEMES

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JASPER JOHNS PRINTS: THREE THEMES

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Downtown Branch
Whitney Museum of American Art
55 Water Street, New York

This exhibition has been organized by the following Helena Rubinstein Fellows in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program: Wendy Persson, Vassar College; Barbara Petersen, New York University; Deborah Phillips, Skidmore College; Helaine Posner, George Washington University; and Barbara Wilson, California State University — Long Beach, with the assistance of Judith Goldman, Prints Advisor to the Whitney Museum. Other Helena Rubinstein Fellows in the Whitney's Independent Study Program are: Kathleen Barkett, Indiana University; Ann Beldecos, Swarthmore College; Kathi Norklun, University of Minnesota — Minneapolis; Margot Norton, New York University — Institute of Fine Arts; and Nancy Princenthal, University of Pennsylvania.

The Downtown Branch Museum is under the direction of David Hupert, Head of the Whitney Museum's Education Department. The Branch Manager is Lisa Phillips.

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Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1972). Oil, encaustic, and collage on canvas with objects, 72 x 192". Museum Ludwig,Cologne.

Three themes—cross-hatchings, flagstones, body parts—have been the central focus of Jasper Johns' work in recent years. This exhibition reveals his use and development of these themes through various methods of printmaking, and the following essays examine Johns' thematic considerations and techniques.

I

The source for the graphic works in the exhibition is Jasper Johns' four panel painting *Untitled* (1972), in which, the artist juxtaposes three images: cross-hatchings, flagstones and body parts. The cross-hatchings appear for the first time in Johns' work in this painting. Johns has stated that he first saw these marks painted on a passing car. In the painting, the cross-hatchings represent the artist's recollection of the original design and his subsequent reworking of it into his own pattern and color scheme. Since 1972, the cross-hatchings have become the major single motif in his work. The flagstones in the middle two panels, like the cross-hatchings, are taken from an experience in everyday life. Johns saw a storefront in Harlem painted to give the illusion of flagstones. He first used this image in his painting *Harlem Light* (1967), and again in *Wall Piece* (1969). The last panel on the right is made up of seven wax casts of body parts. These fragments are attached to wooden boards, which have, in turn, been bolted to the painted surface. Body casts have appeared throughout Johns' work. The earliest examples are *Target with Four Faces* and *Target with Plaster Casts* (both from 1955). He has also incorporated imprints of his own body in paintings, drawings, and prints, an example in the exhibition is the etching from *Foirades/Fizzles,* (cat. # 29-62) with an imprint of the artist's face (cat. # 32).

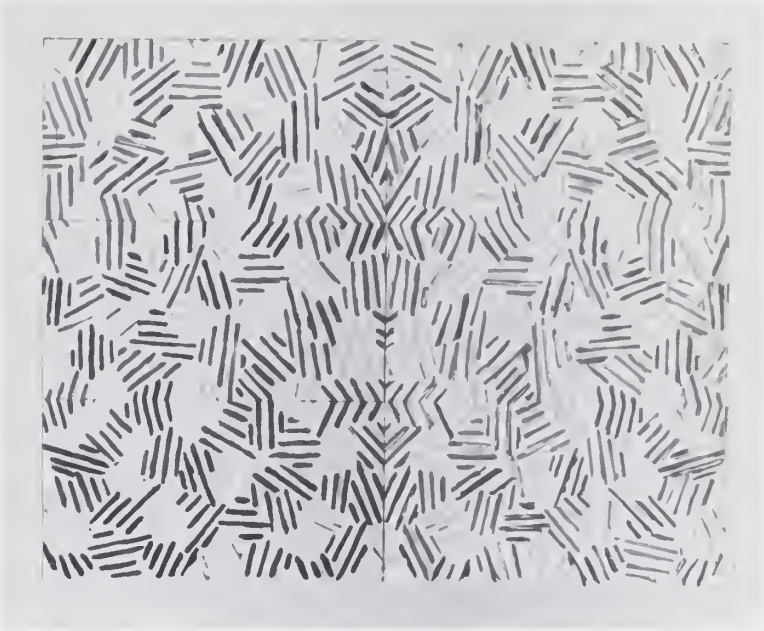
While these themes recall earlier ones in Johns' work, their enigmatic juxtaposition in *Untitled* (1972) is new. It is their arrangement together that creates the richness of interpretation available in the painting. The artist hints at a riddle and at the same time the possibility of solving that riddle. He creates a simultaneous sense of bringing together and taking apart, and at once suggests and denies a continuous process.

Johns has brought together the disparate and provocative elements in *Untitled* (1972) in such a way that one is led to believe each panel is a piece of a puzzle. The repetitiveness of the imagery within each panel suggests the existence of a pattern or system in the relationship of parts to the whole. One indication of an order is the repetition of the two flagstone panels. For example, the red flagstone in the top center of the left panel corresponds to the one in the top right corner of the right panel. Such correspondences appear throughout the two panels. This might define a linking point in the painting except that, for every apparent similarity, Johns has provided a complimentary incongruity.

In *Untitled* (1972) it is possible to see a progressive abstraction from the three-dimensional body casts to the two-dimensional hatchings. Or conversely, there is a building up of the surface from the cross-hatchings to the body parts. The amorphous shapes of the flagstones are simplifications of the body parts, while the color, shape and diagonal direction of the cross-hatchings are reminiscent of the wooden boards. Fragmentation of the imagery, particularly of the human figure, implies organic decomposition. Yet regeneration is also indicated. The flagstones and cross-hatchings may be interpreted as biological forms as seen through a microscope, specifically egg and sperm cells. The repetition and multiplication of all elements in the painting also suggest procreation.

Process and movement are proposed but the direction is never stated. Flux and instability characterize the relationships in the painting. Interchangeability of meanings and contexts is essential to the artist's expression. Johns confronts the viewer with a pluralistic situation. Any attempt to impose a fixed order on the painting is frustrated.

Jasper Johns sets up an ironical situation to reveal and play upon the ambiguities which exist everywhere in our lives. The flagstones and cross-hatchings are images taken from everyday life. Originally they functioned as painted illusions which were intended to transform the surfaces (a storefront and a car) to which they were applied. In *Untitled* (1972) the identity and purpose of these images are altered by their placement in a different context. Johns is intrigued with the contradictions inherent in attaching fixed definitions to the objects in art or life. The role of anything is determined by the particular situation in which it is perceived.



Jasper Johns, *Corpse and Mirror* (1976). Silkscreen, 43 x 53 1/4". Published by Simca Print Artists, Tokyo. Private Collection.

> I am concerned with a thing's not being what it was. With its becoming something other than what it is, with any moment in which one identifies a thing precisely and the slipping away of that moment, with at any moment seeing or saying and letting it go at that.[1]

Johns' theme of contexts and relationships is most explicitly revealed in his treatment of the human figure. The viewer cannot help but be aware of the original form from which these parts have been torn. A face without eyes or a nose is particularly disturbing because of one's immediate recognition of the artist's deliberate dislocation of the senses. Such distortion is further aggravated by the way all of these realistic body parts have been strewn over the surface of the panel. The casts are attached to wooden boards and splattered with drips of encaustic, which seems to suggest that the spectator is witnessing the aftermath of a violent crime or crucifixion.

The sense of disorder is, however, contradicted in a typically Johnsian manner. The wooden boards, to which the body parts are applied, are color coded, numbered, and labeled "L" for left and "R" for right. If taken apart, this panel could easily be reassembled by following the artist's instructions.

II

The issues raised by the body parts theme are complex and intriguing. The viewer does not relate as personally to the body parts of both suites of *Four Panels from Untitled* (1972), 1974 and 1975, (cat. #'s 1 & 18) as he does to the flesh colored wax casts of the painting. In the lithographs, the body parts are two-dimensional and lack the evocations of violence present in the painting. The seven separate prints of body parts, (cat.#'s 2-8) evoke a lyrical quality through the use of the color and the texture of their surfaces. *Sketch from Untitled I* and *Sketch from Untitled II* (both 1974), (cat.#'s 16 & 17) are also derived from the body-parts panel of *Untitled* (1972). Again the body parts are unarticulated silhouettes, labeled with stenciled or cursive lettering.

In *Foirades/Fizzles* (cat.#'s 29-62) the body-parts prints represent a visual combination of the cross-hatching and flagstone themes; the slats reflecting the linear quality of the former, and the shapes of the body parts resembling the cellular quality of the latter. The face in *Foirades/Fizzles* is derived from *Skin I and Skin II* (both 1973) in which Johns coated his hands and face with oil, pressed them to the paper, and rubbed charcoal across the sheets, the charcoal adhering to the oiled surfaces.

III

Sources for the cross-hatchings in Johns' work go as far back as the flag paintings of 1955. The stripe, flat and non-hierarchic, is the basic unit of the flag and cross-hatched works. The cross-hatched lines appear to be fragments, possibly fragments of the human body, such as fingers which may be derived from the hand imagery of *Diver* (1962) and *Periscope (Hart Crane)* (1963).[2]

The most significant historical source for *Scent* (1973-74), a painting consisting entirely of cross-hatchings, is the work of Jackson Pollock. The title, *Scent,* is also the title of Pollock's last painting. The intricate, seemingly random all-over composition is indebted to Pollock's "drip" paintings, as well as late impressionist works such as Monet's *Water Lillies* (1895). However, one senses strong ordering forces beneath the chaotic facade. Johns seems to have regularized Pollock's all-over pattern. His appears logical and disciplined compared to Pollock's spontaneous painting style.

In both the painting and the print of *Scent,* (cat. #19) no patch of cross-hatching abuts another patch of the same color, indicating that the artist has clearly planned his pattern. The composition of the works is rigorously structured. The painting *Scent* consists of three separate panels; in the print *Scent* (1975-1976), (cat. #19) we can also sense a divi-

sion into thirds. In fact, three different print processes—lithography, linocut, and woodcut—distinguish these sections. Johns further subdivides these three sections into thirds again, creating nine vertical columns of cross-hatchings. He repeats these columns in a rhythmic pattern which, if each of the elements were labeled, would read ABC/CDE/EFA.[3] The congruity of the right and left hand sections implies the possibility of an image curving around to meet itself.

In the print *Corpse and Mirror* (1976), (cat. #21, black state lithograph), and *Corpse and Mirror* (1976), (cat. #20, a thirty-six color screenprint), Johns again uses systematic means to form the composition. The prints are divided in half, the right side being a semblance of the left. Each half is then horizontally divided into three sections.

In the *Six Lithographs (after 'Untitled, 1975')* (1976), (cat. #22-27) Johns explores the theme of fragmentation. The forms of the cross-hatchings may be read as fragmented patches. Johns has explored the theme of fragmentation perhaps as a metaphor of alienation.

The *Six Lithographs (after 'Untitled, 1975')* (1976) dissect and analyze the painting *Untitled* (1975) in order to reveal the rules governing the compositional structure, which are difficult to determine in the all-over painting. In the first five prints of the series John isolates two, four, or six squares to reveal that the sixth print, like the painting, is not a field covered with a single all-over pattern, but rather nine delineated or implied squares.

IV

Foirades/Fizzles (1976), (cat. #29-62), is a book of prose fragments by Samuel Beckett with images by Jasper Johns. It is an atypical collaboration because neither Beckett nor Johns conceived the joint project. The artists did not know each other personally, and met only briefly during the various stages of the venture. Beckett contributed translations of five French essays, (1960-74); Johns, etchings incorporating the themes of his painting *Untitled* (1972).

Beckett's essays represent man as stricken, perplexed, and forever threatened.

> Death is the only relief. That is the overriding implication of each situation, discussion, description. But even death is ironic, for life as it is described, or as it is remembered, is gruelingly close to death.[4]

John's themes do not directly illustrate Beckett's writings, but there is a definite kinship of mood between Johns' fragmentary images and Beckett's fragmentary text. Beckett assumes a nihilistic attitude toward life ("I gave up before birth"); John manifests it with the dismembered body parts.

Johns' approach to printing *Foirades/Fizzles* is unconventional in combining a variety of printing processes including lithography, sugar-lift, etching, engraving, open-biting, soft-ground, aquatint, burnishing, photoengraving, drypoint, and screenprinting.

V

Johns' art results from a deliberate and preconceived working process. Despite the spontaneous appearance of their painterly surfaces, the encaustic paintings are created through the methodical means of applying individual pieces of paper dipped in wax on to the canvas. Having developed a systematic and progressive method of working, Johns easily adapted to the step-by-step nature of printmaking.

Johns was introduced to lithography by Tatyana Grosman of Universal Limited Art Editions in 1960, and immediately began to test lithography's capabilities and extend its possibilities. "Johns began printmaking by trying to complicate the lithography process as much as possible."[5]

Printmaking reinforced Johns' initial concerns with multiple imagery and sequential progression. It allowed him to exactly duplicate and repeat an image; to superimpose and progressively complicate images; and to indulge in cerebral games through contrived arrangements of simplified images.

Another characteristic concern in Johns' work is figure/ground relationships. The integrity and importance of the figure in relation to the ground is based on the equal emphasis of each, rather than domination/subordination. The ground is articulated to the point of prominence, to ultimately establish a figure/ground ambiguity. Consider the color and black states of the body parts suites: each body fragment is defined by a line which barely distinguishes the figure from the ground.

However, the differences between painting and printmaking were probably disconcerting to Johns. To a painter who enjoyed and flaunted the physicality of highly textured collaged encaustic surfaces, Johns must have found the intrinsic flatness of the printed image contrary. Perhaps it was his desire to approximate three-dimensionality that led him to embossing techniques.

The most important similarity between Johns as a painter and printmaker is his desire to have many intermediate stages for reworking and revising his imagery. In Johns' encaustic paintings the hot wax hardens quickly, thereby allowing for the superimposition of color or images without losing the evidence or identity of the preceding marks. Printmaking also encourages this process. Trial proofs are used to add or change colors, experiment with different techniques, and alter existing imagery.

It is the reappearance and transformation of familiar images into new forms which characterize the essential nature of the aesthetic and expressive content of Jasper Johns' art.

Footnotes:

1. G. R. Swenson, "What is Pop Art?" Interviews with eight painters (Part II) *Art News,* vol. 62, no. 10, February 1964, p. 43.
2. Jeff Perrone, "Jasper Johns' New Paintings," *Artforum,* vol. 14, no. 8, April 1976, p. 50.
3. Thomas B. Hess, "On the Scent of Jasper Johns," *New York Magazine,* vol. 9, no. 6, February 9, 1976, p. 67.
4. Judith Goldman, *Foirades/Fizzles,* Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1977, p. 2.
5. Michael Crichton, *Jasper Johns,* Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York (in association with the Whitney Museum of American Art), 1977, p. 4.

GLOSSARY

Intaglio is the generic term for all printing methods which involve cutting lines into the surface of a metal plate. This includes techniques such as etching, engraving, and aquatint. In each case, when the plate is inked, it is the incised lines which hold the ink. In printing, the press transfers the ink onto the paper, and the resulting image is raised.

Aquatint is a printing technique used to give a variation of tones. An acid resistant resin is applied to the surface of a metal plate. This plate is then placed into an acid bath. The acid eats into those areas which are not covered with the resin. The darkness or lightness of the tones created is determined by the length of time the metal plate remains in the acid bath.

Burnishing creates highlights in aquatint areas of a print. This is achieved by smoothing over and eliminating recessed marks from the metal plate by means of a polished metal tool. Because these smooth surfaces will not hold ink they create the highlights.

Drypoint is making marks by carving directly into a metal plate with a very pointed tool—a needle or dental tool. The incised marks create furrows of metal called burrs. In printing the burrs hold the ink, and the printed line appears fuzzy.

Engravings are made by cutting a design with a carving tool, a burin or graver, into a metal plate, The burin is held in one hand and, as it is pushed forward, the other hand rotates the plate against the pressure of the burin. The result is an image with curved lines which vary in thickness according to the pressure applied to the burin.

Etching is a chemical process. A metal plate is covered with an acid resist. A design is then scratched with a needle into this acid resistant coating or "ground." The plate is placed into an acid bath. The acid only eats into the exposed areas of the plate, and it is those areas which create the image.

Open-biting is used to create deep lines and shapes into a metal plate. Large areas of the metal plate are exposed to acid, which eats into them. When printed these lines lines and shapes will stand in relief.

Softground refers to the use of an extremely malleable etching ground on a metal plate. The ground is so soft that even the slightest touch will lift it off. After exposure to acid, lines drawn into this ground have the effect of chalk or pencil lines when they are printed.

Sugarlift is a "ground" made from a mixture of sugar, water, and ink. The artist draws an image onto a metal plate with this ground using a brush or pen. The plate is then covered with a hard etching ground. Once this ground has dried the plate is soaked in warm water. The water dissolves the sugar, lifting those areas of ground off the plate. The resulting exposed areas are then etched.

Lithography is a method of printing which depends upon the incompatibility of oil and water. A design is drawn onto a fine grained limestone slab with a lithographic ink called tusche. The surface is then treated with a solution of gum arabic and nitric acid, known as an etch, which serves to stabilize the image onto the surface. Before printing, the surface is sponged with water and rolled with a greasy ink. The ink is repelled by the wet areas and adheres only to those areas originally drawn in tusche. The areas retaining the ink result in the printed image.

Silkscreen is a stencil method of printing. A screen is made by stretching a piece of fine silk onto a frame. A finished silk resembles a tray with a silk bottom. An oil based ink, or a glue diluted with water, is stencilled onto the silk, filling in the pores. The parts of the screen covered with the solution will not let any ink through. To print, ink is poured into the margin of the tray. The frame is placed over a sheet of paper, and a rubber scraper called a sqeegee is pulled firmly across the silk. The ink goes through the uncoated areas, leaving the image on the paper. For each color of a silkscreen print a different screen is used.

Woodcutting was one of the first methods of printmaking. A design is carved into a block of wood. The uncarved areas of the original surface are coated with ink. The inked surface is transferred by pressure onto paper. Because it is the uncarved surface which yields the image, woodcutting is referred to as relief printing.

Linocutting is the same method as woodcutting except that the carving surface is linoleum.

Embossing is a printing process which creates raised surfaces of paper. First, a design is etched or carved into a metal plate. Then, wet paper is molded into this plate by the pressure of a press, creating a raised design.

Encaustic is a method of painting with pigments suspended in molten wax. This method was much practiced in the ancient Roman Empire.

CHECKLIST:

1. *Four Panels from Untitled (1972),* 1974
Four part embossed color lithograph
each panel, 40 x 28 1/2 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Castelli Graphics, New York

2. *A. Face,* 1974
lithograph
30 3/4 x 22 3/4 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Castelli Graphics, New York

3. *B. Handfootsockfloor,* 1974
lithograph
30 3/4x 22 3/4 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Castelli Graphics, New York

4. *C. Buttocks,* 1974
lithograph
30 3/4 x 22 3/4 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Castelli Graphics, New York

5. *D. Torso,* 1974
lithograph
30 3/4 x 22 3/4 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Castelli Graphics, New York

6. *E. Feet,* 1974
lithograph
30 3/4 x 22 3/4 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Castelli Graphics, New York

7. *F. Leg,* 1974
lithograph
30 3/4 x 22 3/4 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Castelli Graphics, New York

8. *G. Knee,* 1974
lithograph
30 3/4 x 22 3/4inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Castelli Graphics, New York

9. *Face (Black State),* 1974
lithograph
15 3/4 x 13 3/4 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles

10. *Handfootsockfloor (Black State),* 1974
lithograph
16 x 19 3/4 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles

11. *Buttocks* (Black State), 1974
lithograph
16 x 16 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles

12. *Torso (Black State),* 1974
lithograph
18 1/2 x 16 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Brooke Alexander Inc., New York

13. *Feet (Black State),* 1974
lithograph
16 x 16 1/2 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles

14. *Leg (Black State),* 1974
lithograph
16 x 22 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles

15. *Knee (Black State),* 1974
lithograph
15 3/4 x 15 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles

16. *Sketch from Untitled I,* 1974
lithograph
36 1/2 x 26 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Getler/Pall Master Prints, New York

17. *Sketch from Untitled II,* 1974
lithograph
42 x 29 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Castelli Graphics, New York

18. *Four Panels from Untitled (1972),* 1975
four part lithograph
published by Gemini G.E.L.
courtesy of Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles

19. *Scent,* 1975-1976
linocut, lithograph and woodcut
published by Universal Limited Art Editions
collection of Mr. & Mrs. Lester Eisner

20. *Corpse and Mirror,* 1976
screenprint, 36 colors
42 1/2 x 53 inches
published by Simca Print Artists, Tokyo
private collection

21. *Corpse and Mirror,* 1976
lithograph
30 3/4 x 39 3/4 inches
published by Universal Limited Art Editions
collection of Mr. David Corey

22.—
27. *Six Lithographs (after 'Untitled, 1975'),* 1976
lithographs
each lithograph, 30 1/8 x 29 7/8 inches
published by Gemini G.E.L.
private collection

28. *Untitled,* 1977
screenprint
24 x 19 inches
published by Simca Print Artists, Tokyo
courtesy of Brooke Alexander Inc., New York

Foirades/Fizzles, 1975-1976
description of plates

Unless otherwise noted, each etching was printed from a single copper plate at Atelier Crommelynck in Paris in 1975 and 1976. Plates are numbered consecutively here beginning with the end papers. All sheet sizes are 13 by 10 inches, except for Plates One, Four, Thirteen, Twenty, Twenty-four, Thirty-one and Thirty-three, which are 13 by 20 inches.

29. *Plate One*
four-color aquatint with drypoint in orange, green, violet and white from four copper plates

30. *Plate Two*
softground with etching

31. *Plate Three*
sugar-lift aquatint with engraving and burnishing

32. *Plate Four*
sugar-lift aquatint with etching and burnishing

33. *Plate Five*
softground with aquatint and etching

34. *Plate Six*
softground with sugar-lift aquatint

35. *Plate Seven*
softground with sugar-lift aquatint and etching

36. *Plate Eight*
softground with sugar-lift aquatint, open-biting and drypoint

37. *Plate Nine*
aquatint

38. *Plate Ten*
etching with drypoint and aquatint

39. *Plate Eleven*
etching with sugar-lift aquatint

40. *Plate Twelve*
etching

41. *Plate Thirteen*
sugar-lift aquatint

42. *Plate Fourteen*
etching and sugar-lift aquatint

43. *Plate Fifteen*
etching with aquatint

44. *Plate Sixteen*
etching with aquatint

45. *Plate Seventeen*
etching with sugar-lift aquatint and open-biting

46. *Plate Eighteen*
aquatint

47. *Plate Nineteen*
sugar-lift aquatint. The photographic image was screenprinted in sugar-lift onto the copper plate

48. *Plate Twenty*
softground with sugar-lift aquatint and burnishing

49. *Plate Twenty-one*
sugar-lift aquatint

50. *Plate Twenty-two*
sugar-lift aquatint

51. *Plate Twenty-three*
etching with sugar-lift aquatint

52. *Plate Twenty-four*
etching with aquatint

53. *Plate Twenty-five*
etching with aquatint

54. *Plate Twenty-six*
etching with aquatint

55. *Plate Twenty-seven*
etching with sugar-lift aquatint and burnishing

56. *Plate Twenty-eight*
etching with sugar-lift aquatint over photo-engraving

57. *Plate Twenty-nine*
etching with aquatint over open-biting

58. *Plate Thirty*
etching with aquatint

59. *Plate Thirty-one*
etching with sugar-lift aquatint

60. *Plate Thirty-two*
sugar-lift aquatint with engraving and burnishing

61. *Plate Thirty-three*
sugar-lift aquatint in three colors—red, black, and white—from three copper plates

62. *Case Lining*
front and back, four-color lithograph in orange, green, violet, and white from four plates, printed by William Law at Petersburg Press, New York.